

Degrees of educational success

■By 2nd Lt. Justin Herman
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Many people join the Air Force for the education benefits, but according to Department of Veterans Affairs officials, half of the people who pay the \$1,200 for the Montgomery GI Bill never use it.

Although he hasn't used his GI Bill benefits yet either, Master Sgt. Mark O'Berry has not failed to capitalize on educational opportunities while on active-duty—he's earned two associates, a bachelor's and a master's degree with tuition assistance, and he is currently working on obtaining his teaching certificate.

With his education, Sergeant O'Berry, 53d Wing military personnel superintendent, could retire in July into private business. Instead, the Florida native is "proud to serve again" as an educator at a "school-in-need" through the Troops-to-Teachers program.

The TTT program assists active-duty people to transition from servicemember to educator by helping to cover expenses incurred while pursuing a teaching certification. Up to \$10,000 in assistance may be awarded for certification.

A school-in-need is identified when more than 20 percent of the student body qualifies for the free- or reduced-lunch program. More than 98 percent of Florida public schools fall into that category, according to John Roth, a TTT counselor.

"I didn't start my higher education in my first years of service because I was lazy," said Sergeant O'Berry, whose desire to educate young people began with volunteering at a church youth group. "I put a lot of importance on education because

his career.

"I was already 21 when I enlisted and initially had no desire to be an officer," Sergeant O'Berry said. "When I was a cop working shifts, it was difficult to make the time (for school). But once I did have the education to qualify for Officer Training School, it was too late. I hadn't been looking at the long term."

1st Lt. Jason Boisvert, 53d Wing section chief and Sergeant O'Berry's supervisor, highlighted parallels between the NCO's off-duty education pursuits and his ability to multitask job responsibilities. "From a management standpoint,

how people interact with their coworkers is very important," Lieutenant Boisvert said. "Sergeant O'Berry is calm under pressure and doesn't stress out at all; this is from being able to effectively prioritize tasks. The experience of going through all that schooling while on active duty definitely teaches a person to balance and prioritize."

The master sergeant recommends that other airmen make education a priority and take advantage of the Air Force tuition assistance program and the Montgomery GI Bill. Tuition assistance covers 100 percent of educational costs up to caps of \$250 per credit hour and \$4,500 per year. The GI Bill provides up to \$985 a month towards institutional training for up to 36 months.

"Once I begin my new career, I'll probably use my GI Bill to learn more about the subject that I teach," said

Sergeant O'Berry, who currently is an assistant teacher at Lewis Middle School in Valparaiso, Fla. "I enjoy interacting with people and other students. When I'm not doing that, I get bored and miss it."

For more information on all education options available for military members, contact the local base education office. For more information on the Troops-to-Teachers program, go to www.proudtoserveagain.com.

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As a young airman from a town without its own high school, Sergeant O'Berry said continuing education was not something that he spent too much time focusing on.

"When I was in high school I thought about going to college, but I really didn't think it was possible," Sergeant O'Berry said. "I had supervisors in the past who strongly encouraged off-duty education, though, and a lot of the training we do in the military gives us a background that helps being in the classroom."

Prioritizing education with work duties and personal commitments is not always an easy balance however. Despite an industrious use of active-duty opportunities, the former security forces member regrets not beginning his journey earlier in

